

## THE BRIDGE

by Kathleen Ann Goonan

**Kathleen Ann Goonan's latest novel, *In War Times* (Tor, May 2007), received starred reviews from *Publisher's Weekly*, *Kirkus*, and *Booklist*. It begins in WWII, continues through the sixties, and includes narratives written by her father, Thomas E. Goonan. He was in the 610th OBAM Battalion, which served in England and the Rhineland. Kathy has published about thirty short stories, many of them in *Asimov's*. She is also known for her nanotech novels, *Queen City Jazz*, *Mississippi Blues*, *Crescent City Rhapsody*, and *Light Music*. Nanotechnology also shows up in her hard-boiled mystery of "The Bridge." Although the story was originally published as "De l'autre côté du pont" in *Détectives de l'Impossible*, *J'ai lu Millénaires*, May 2002, this is its first appearance in English. You can find out more about Kathy's fiction at [www.goonan.com](http://www.goonan.com).**

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I took the case because I was out of money. It was not the sort of case a self-respecting private eye wants.

But I was desperate.

In these times, hardly anyone needs a private detective. After all, these are the days of miracle and wonder, when one's own true love, even one's simulacrum, so to speak, can be spun in a cocoon over on Wilson Boulevard by Nelson's Artificial Person (fully licensed by whatever is left of the U.S. Government), and inculcated with any kind of physical and emotional frillery one fancies. Or thinks that one fancies.

Nanotechnology is, of course, a buzzword for "we can do anything." I don't understand exactly how an artificial person is grown, but each is a flesh and bone blank (many types and sizes in the catalogues), ready for final DNA tweaking and memory infusion. After the rash of memory-related Nobel prizes, competing memory preservation and replication techniques flooded the market, leading to the melding of many technologies. It was but a short jump to a development that has been both vaunted and abhorred: artificial people.

We are at a very odd place, you see. We are obviously "creating life," and who could argue with that? Yet, people certainly have. Vast phalanxes of lawyers on both sides of the issues have made a lot of money lately, but the most they seem to be able to do is engage in skirmishes about some

minute aspect of the various processes presently in use.

It is against the law to kill these beings, should they disappoint, although the penalties for doing so are minimal. It was this sort of instance that I was called upon to investigate.

I was hired by the artificial person's sister.

\* \* \* \*

She knocked on my office-door window on a Friday evening just after I had poured myself a Scotch. It was mid-December, gloomy at four-thirty PM, and that was evening enough to justify the first drink of the day. A light snow was falling, and the flakes outside my third-floor window glowed green, gold, and blue each time the Harry's Bar sign just below changed color.

My office is in Rosslyn, Virginia, a few blocks from the Potomac River. Across Key Bridge is whatever was left of Washington, D.C. It had been utterly changed by a nanotech surge five years earlier.

We unchanged huddle here across the river. Many of the buildings here are altered, of course; new forms of communication are in full swing: giant beelike creatures fill the sky during the day, moving information here and there. Broadcast communication works only sporadically.

Almost everything else has changed.

But for me, on that day, nothing had changed. I had made sure of that. In fact, most days I entertained thoughts of cashing out completely, but even that seemed like too much trouble.

The woman cupped her hands to the glass in an attempt to see inside my dark office.

Illuminated by the dim bulb in the hallway, her face was pale, her eyes large and dark. Her hair was black. She wore a small, blue felt hat perched atop a sophisticated hairdo, with a net that swept across her eyes without hiding them. Her blue wool suit fit tightly; when she stepped back from the door, and looked doubtfully up and down the hall, I could see that her skirt was long and tight, with a little fillip at the bottom that gave her legs just enough room to take mincing steps. I knew that she wore high heels because I had heard them as she approached down the hall.

I decided that I wanted to see what they looked like.

I pushed my rumpled self up from my rumpled couch, tucked in my shirt, straightened my slightly stained tie. I am middle-aged, unable to afford—but not wanting, either—so many of the bionan enhancements at large in the world today. My looks are plain—a slightly heavy face, whiskers that grow too quickly, small blue eyes, a receding hairline, and a depressive personality that dulls whatever sparkle my mother might have seen in me. Like most private eyes, I used to be a police detective. For many years, I was quite successful. Most days, now, I sat in my office and wondered what I could do to make a living. I'd already put in a notice to the landlord that I was leaving at the end of the year. My office was cheap, but not cheap enough.

“Come in, the door's open,” I called, as she turned to leave.

She looked startled, but turned the knob.

She reminded me of a giraffe—awkward in her tallness, her head bent forward slightly in a way that was calculated to be charming, diffident. Her brief smile did not reach her eyes.

“Hello. I'm looking for—a Mr. Mike Jones?” She looked around, clearly hoping to find a competent-looking detective—or at least a competent-looking receptionist—somewhere in the room.

“That's me. Come in.” The shoes were black, open-toed slingbacks, strikingly inappropriate in this weather. She either had no sense, or couldn't afford to buy new shoes—and therefore, couldn't afford me.

I hoped that she had no sense.

“Come into my office.” I was torn, for a moment, between professionalism and need as I walked past the half-filled glass of Scotch still on the end table.

Need won. I picked it up. “I was almost ready to close. Can I pour you a drink?”

“No,” she said, with distaste and a bit of doubt.

I went to my desk and turned on my single desk lamp. She settled into one of the hard wooden chairs in front of my desk, and I sat behind it. She set her small black bag on my desk, which I took as a good sign. She

did not remove her tight, gray leather gloves before folding her hands in her lap.

“How can I help you?”

“I saw your name on a card downstairs...”

“Ah. You frequent Harry’s?” I tried to keep several cards shoved under the glass top of the bar.

“No,” she said, decisively, wrinkling her nose. “I just needed ... some hot coffee, this afternoon, and I saw your card there.”

No one with any money to speak of would go into Harry’s bar on a snowy afternoon for hot coffee. There is a boutique coffeehouse next door. The coffee is three dollars a pop, but it hasn’t sat on the burner all day.

There was a street march just a few weeks ago about the little war we have going on here, the war between the future and the past, so it was possible that she was from the future, trying to live in what was left of the past, for reasons which might spell money for me. As one of those who is quite fond of the past, I’d clung to the sinking ship for far too long. I didn’t like the view over there on the future side.

Or maybe I was just a sad old loser too stupid to take a chance.

I cradled the Scotch between both hands. “How can I help you?”

“I need you to get my mother and sister out of copyright. I want the rights to them.”

“They are ... some kind of program?”

She nodded, a tragic look in her dark eyes. Her nose was slightly crooked, which gave her a charming air of imperfection.

“I think that you need a lawyer.”

She shook her head. “No. They can’t do anything for me. I went to one and she told me what needs to happen.”

“Which is?”

“They need to be out in the world, living on their own, without being

formally accused of being artificial, for five years.”

“That’s a long time.”

“I want them now!”

“Where are they?”

“They were killed in a car crash four years ago. But I’m getting ahead of myself. Many years ago, my father had programs of us made so that we could be duplicated.”

“That would have been illegal.”

“At that time, yes.”

“It still is. But it was done fairly often, it seems.”

“Well. Anyway, it seems that my father has fallen in love with another woman. I attend the University of Virginia. It’s in Charlottesville.”

“I know.” It was about two hours away, a prestigious university. “And?”

“I came home for a visit last week, and found that my mother and sister were...” She bowed her head, covered her face with her gloved hands, and began to weep. Her thin shoulders shook. “He had them—*disassembled.*”

“What does that mean—disassembled?”

Did a brief look of satisfaction cross her face? She looked up again. “It means that their minds—their personalities—were erased, using a disassembly enzyme. At least—I mean, I’m not sure, exactly, how it works...” She shook her head in apparent disbelief.

“What happened?”

“I surprised him. The process wasn’t finished, and there were still loose ends he had to clean up. I had a key, of course, and just came in, a few days earlier than expected. I called out, got no answer, went looking for someone. A strange woman came out of the living room and said, ‘Who are you?’ My father came from the kitchen and she yelled ‘Frank, I thought you had taken care of this.’

“Then I looked over and saw my mother and my sister sitting on the couch. Their hands were folded in their laps and they were staring straight ahead. They didn’t recognize me. They didn’t even notice me. I ran over to them, shook them, screamed at them, cried. ‘What’s wrong?’ I kept saying over and over again. And after a minute, it dawned on me. Both of them, with that vacant look! I turned to my father and yelled at him to help, to stop it, to call a doctor. Instead, he grabbed my shoulders, tightly. His face looked different. Mean; angry. I tried to pull away but he wouldn’t let me go. I struggled and got loose. Ran out the door, down the street. He followed but couldn’t catch me.”

I sipped warm Scotch and surmised that she had not been wearing her high heels at that time. “I don’t mean to upset you, but you must explain to me how disassembly happens.”

“I’m not sure. I always thought it happened to ... other people. Artificial people. Not me. Not my mother, my sister. Why would I think of it in relation to us? We are—we were—real! I never paid any attention to the news reports or controversy or anything. Certainly not any technical details.”

I lighted a cigarette. “Certainly creating artificial people is beyond the means of most people.”

“My father is very wealthy. He’s a well-known lawyer. Frank Quick. We live ... I mean, I used to live, out in Great Falls. Here’s his address.” She slid a folded piece of paper across my desk.

I let it sit there. “I assume that you went to the police.”

“Oh, yes! There was nothing they could do. That was when I found out, you see, that I was a duplicate. It was quite a shock. I realized that he was planning to have me disassembled as well. Just get rid of the old family and have a new one!”

“You didn’t know before that you are artificial?”

“No. I didn’t know that we were killed in this car wreck. We were all in the hospital with various problems for quite some time afterwards. I had a broken neck. My mother had a ruptured spleen, and my sister suffered brain damage. My father could afford the most progressive therapies available. I thought that we had been *healed*, not *re-created*.”

“Was he in this automobile accident?”

“He was the driver.”

“Was he injured?”

“I believe he had some minor injuries.”

“Which hospital?”

I thought she hesitated before answering. “Arlington General.”

“It seems odd that he would go to such lengths to preserve all of you, and then suddenly get rid of you.”

She frowned. “I’m not sure what’s wrong with him. Some disease of the mind that he refuses to have diagnosed, I’m sure. His younger self would never have done such a thing. He loved us. He loved us so much that he went to great expense! But I suppose that ... maybe something was missing in us, since we were not real....” She looked at the floor and tears welled in her eyes and slowly moved down her thin, fine-boned face.

I pushed a box of tissue over toward her.

“But no one has challenged your right to exist. Correct?”

“I believe that he will, if he can’t disassemble me quietly. He doesn’t know where I am. I have no money right now; I’m sorry. I’m afraid that he might find me if I try and access any of my accounts. I need help.”

Just my luck. “What do you want me to do?”

She leaned forward. Her eyes gleamed in the light of the neon sign. “I want my mother back. And my sister. Their copies are in his safe. The updated information that can re-create them, right to the moment of their disassembly. I’ve drawn a map of the house on that paper that shows where the safe is. The house is alarmed; I included the code for you.”

“You are asking me to burgle a house, not solve a crime. Why can’t you do this yourself ?”

“I told you.” Her voice rose. “He wants to ... do away with me. I fear for my life. I can’t go back there. I’m sure he’s trying to find me.” She blinked a few times, obviously trying to calm down. She succeeded, and continued in her previous, reasoned tone of voice. “I’m working on getting access to my accounts without giving away my location. I can have some

money for you in a day or two.”

“My fees are one hundred dollars an hour, plus expenses. Travel, anything that I need to pay for. I require a retainer of a thousand dollars.”

“I will have to owe you.”

What else did I have to do?

On the other hand, my soul was just about the only thing I still owned and it seemed a good thing to have.

She must have noticed my indecision.

“There is one more thing,” she said, wiping her eyes with a tissue. “We might be real.”

“You mean that he might not really have re-created you after the accident.”

“Yes.”

“Then it would be murder.”

“Yes.”

“So it seems that you are not entirely sure about whether they were artificial or real.”

She hesitated a second. “No.”

I sighed. It was something. “I would be glad to investigate the possible murder of your mother and your sister, Ms. Quick, for the aforementioned fees. Do you have any photographs of them?”

“Ah ... yes, but ... why would you need them?” She looked confused and a bit irritated.

An interesting reaction. Most people want to provide the detective with all the information they have, no matter how irrelevant. “For my investigation.”

A tiny frown creased her forehead. She dug into her purse, took out a wallet, and tossed two photos onto my desk.



“And your father too?”

“Oh. Of course. Here. You’ll do it, then?”

“I told you: I will investigate the facts surrounding these possible murders.”

“But the copies?”

“If your mother and sister are indeed artificial persons, and their copies are in this safe, it is possible that the copies might fall into my hands during the course of my investigations.”

She did not look entirely satisfied, but nodded once. “All right.”

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, after I rose from my couch and washed in the small bathroom in my office, I began to work in spite of myself. Old habits die hard.

I hadn’t told her, and she hadn’t asked. That was the strange part.

I was in a building that had not been infused with receptor capabilities. In pre-conversion language, it had not been wired.

But what was happening now—here, everywhere—was different from being wired. It was internal.

Communications—regular, old communications like the way they were back in the old days—were gone. Because of the electromagnetic interference. Telephones—and, therefore, the good old Internet—didn’t work. Broadcasting didn’t work. No one knew what was causing this, but it was like a long solar flare that might never end.

Arlington was being Converted to new biological ways of doing things. Interstices filled with benign bacteria capable of carrying an infinite amount of information ran up the sides of converted buildings. There was a port in every room, where a clear, semi-permeable membrane gave access to those who were converted, through the wonders of genetic engineering, and could send and receive information. They call it metaperomonal communication.

The owner of the Zephyr Building, in which I have my office, is a tightwad. When it became clear that he was never going to convert the building, most tenants moved out.

Julia Quick either did not know or did not mind that both the building and, by inference, myself, had not stepped into the future.

Or maybe she did, and, finding it to her advantage, didn't care. It wouldn't take much asking to find out about me. I was a bit of a local joke.

Outside, snow fell in great sheets. I turned my collar up and walked over to the morgue. It was six blocks but I needed the exercise and could not afford the Metro. I was still not sure what was compelling me to do this work. Not money, not yet. Ms. Julia Quick had disappeared last night after pressing my hands gratefully, her hands still in her expensive gray gloves, then clicking her way down the hall.

It took more than half an hour for them to believe my license, since I don't have receptors. The woman behind the counter was astounded. She kept pulling other clerks over to gaze at my backward face. "Go ahead, touch him! There's nothing there!"

"That's because it's all here," I told her, pointing to my license on the counter.

She narrowed her eyes at me. "That's just a piece of paper. You could say anything on a piece of paper."

"So DNA can't lie, right? Listen," I said, getting hot. "The right hacker could slip in a new identity code in three minutes."

"There's no need to be rude. You may put that away."

In a moment she slid a sheet of what looked like ordinary paper, but was not, across the counter. I took it and hurried out the front door. Cold wet snow still fell. I hiked across a courtyard, went down an open stairway where the wind blew an empty paper cup to and fro between concrete confines, and opened the familiar back door to the morgue.

Dr. Frisco had been there all night and I caught her just as she was leaving. She was consequently quite short with me. It was clear that she wanted to get home and get some sleep.

"Dr. Frisco?" I stepped in front of her as she strode down the hall, her

white coat billowing behind her.

She glared at me. “What?”

“I need to ask some questions.”

“Who are you?” Her finger poised. The pad of her index finger was pale blue.

I dug out my license. She glanced at it. “No receptors?”

“No.”

“Your religion or something?”

“No.”

“Never mind. I remember you now. Private eye. Haven’t seen you in a while. What’s your question?”

“Do you recall seeing these bodies here?” I showed her the photos that Julia had left with me.

“No. Should I?” She looked more closely at the information on the sheet I handed her. “Four years ago? Are you kidding?”

“You signed their death certificates, here.”

She looked again; touched a circle at the bottom. “That’s not my signature.”

“Thanks. The other two?”

She shook her head, frowning. “No, these are all ... forgeries. But you got them...” she touched the first one again. “You just got them over at registry.”

“So these people didn’t die?”

She looked at me impatiently. “You know as well as I do that all I’m saying is that these documents are fake. Some hacker has been in the system.” She sighed. “Well, it’s nothing new. I told them they were rushing into this too fast. Look, is that all?”

“Thanks.”

\* \* \* \*

Julia returned that afternoon, still wearing the blue suit, but now wrapped in a dark wool cape with a hood.

I was glad that she showed up. I felt as if my morning had been a waste of time and I half-thought that I would never see her again, that she had been visited upon me by the gods of futility, who seemed to have made themselves comfortable in just about every area of my life. First the marriage, then my business, now the world...

On the other hand, she had provided me with something to be curious about. Something to make me want to live another day, just to see what happened.

She settled into the chair and again refused my offer of a drink.

I sipped carefully today. It was my last ounce and I was glad not to have to split it. My breakfast and lunch had been donuts.

“Did you get the copies?” she asked.

“Not yet.”

“What have you done today?” she asked, her voice sharp.

“Not much. Tell me about the automobile accident.”

“I don’t remember it. We never discussed it. It was only when I found them ... like that ... that I started to investigate and discovered that we were all copies.”

“Then tell me about this process. How does one’s personality—one’s memories, everything—become pure information?”

“I don’t know, really. I only know that it can be done, and that it is being done all the time now. The information can be imbedded in various mediums.”

She did recall being “read,” when she was eleven years old. Her face softened and her eyelids lowered as she spoke in a low, singsong voice. “We drove into rural Virginia, toward the mountains. It was a cloudy fall day.

My sister and I played games in the back seat.”

Her hooded cape was soaked, so I knew that she had walked and not taken the Metro; the entrance was only steps from the building. But walked from where? I let her keep talking.

“When we passed through Charlottesville, my father said that he had met the doctor who would be working with us at the University, and that he was very good. The highway kept going uphill and first it was foggy and then it was just cold and drizzly and we could hardly see beyond the car. We got off the highway at the top of the mountain and turned left.”

“You turned left?” I raised my eyebrows.

She scowled briefly. I probably wouldn’t have seen it save that the bar sign changed from red to bright white in that instant. She dropped her eyelids and continued. “Oh, yes. I remember very well. I’m good at directions. We went underneath a wrought-iron arch that said Swannanoa Life Extension Institute. It was an old stone place, kind of like a castle.

“The doctor was a big man. He had a beard. He seemed very nice. He wore a white coat and after the secretary had seated us and given us apple cider and, I think, my parents wine—there were oriental rugs on the floor and some classical music playing very softly—he and my parents went away. The secretary took us to another room where we played Go. It started snowing.”

“What was the name of this doctor?”

She continued in her dreamy, semi-hypnotized tone, “Doctor White.” Then her eyes widened for a fraction of a second and she swallowed. “I think.” She looked out the window. “No. It was ... Green. Or ... was it Elliott? I don’t remember....”

“How long did it take?”

She answered eagerly. She seemed very happy to change the subject. “I don’t know. You dream a lot. But it’s not the same as regular sleep dreaming. Images race through your head, but they are very intense, very real.”

I’d read that they used a combination of powerful psychotropic drugs and hypnotism. But I’m no scientist. I can’t begin to understand how they can replicate identity. It would seem impossible. And people have

complained that it doesn't really work very well, the people who have had this done.

"What are you majoring in?" I asked.

She stared at me for a split second, then said, "Medicine, Mr. Jones. I am a second-year medical student. Although I don't see what my personal life has to do with anything."

"I realize that you have access to very little money, but at this point I will have to begin charging an hourly rate plus expenses. Today I spent four hours—"

"Four hours! What did you do?"

"I spoke to Dr. Frisco at the morgue."

She became agitated. "The morgue! What were you doing there? All you need to do, Mr. Jones, is get the copies! I have given you the map; you know where it is in his bedroom; you can watch to see when he leaves the house! However you do such things!"

"I am the detective here, Ms. Quick." I watched her face carefully. "I understand that you want and need documentation of the truth of the matter here, and that—"

She leaned forward in her chair abruptly. Her face was twisted. "I just want my sister and mother," she hissed. "Get me the copies and I will pay you all the money that you could possibly want."

"So you don't really want to free them from the legal thrall of being merely a copy. Or even, it seems, re-create them."

"That's not true! Of course it isn't! But this is the first step."

"Tell me the truth. Why is it that you want these copies?"

"To prove—" she took a breath and looked out the window for a second before continuing. She cleared her throat. "To prove that my father committed this crime."

"How? If what is in the safe is simply their original copies—"

She shook her head. "My sister and my mother had a system which

was constantly updated. The information is embedded in the eye, which is removable and which does not degrade. When their copies are re-infused into a body, the information will be there.”

“Which of your eyes is it in?”

She blinked, staring at me once again. The light was dim, of course, but both looked perfectly normal to me. But then, I supposed, they would.

She stood. “You have all the information you need. I’m working on getting the money. I’ll be back with it tomorrow.” Her voice held an edge of hostility. She left in a hurry.

I slipped on my coat, waited for a moment, then followed her.

She walked downhill, towards Key Bridge.

She stepped onto the bridge and began to walk.

I could not believe it. No one crossed that bridge.

She walked casually; quickly; not as one who was afraid. Her hands were in her pockets and her head was up.

She disappeared into the fog.

I felt a stab of fear for her.

From this side, the city sometimes looked the same. The obelisk of the Washington Monument gleamed whitely in the sun, along with the Capitol dome. It appeared that people were inside, going about some kind of business. But often light was refracted from the city in strange ways, blurring what was visible. Binoculars sometimes revealed blocks where the city was older, where buildings torn down a hundred years ago had reappeared. Sometimes, it was claimed, famous Washingtonians like Duke Ellington or various dead presidents were spotted.

A team of scientists went in, at the beginning, wearing what they believed were impermeable suits. They never emerged. Other people disappeared from time to time as well. Crossing the bridge was widely regarded as being the same as committing suicide. Only the young, the curious, and the hopeless went inside. And the greedy. I had read an account of a man who had gone over in order to cart out antiques, only to have them disintegrate once they were out on the bridge, out of the fog of

the city.

Some claimed that everything inside was a kind of holographic reproduction. Others thought that the nanotech surge that had overtaken the city that strange and terrible night had not simply replicated, perfectly, all that was there before, but had infused it with a mass mind that outsiders simply could not understand.

I did not follow Julia.

But I watched the shifting, dreamy lights of Georgetown through the fog for a long time before turning back.

\* \* \* \*

The public transit to Charlottesville was pleasant, and free. I went through the usual rigmarole at the registrar's office with my license and so on, but eventually they gave the information I wanted.

I had little trouble locating Dr. White's scheduled lecture. The hall was full of people who looked extremely young, far too young to be medical students.

It was Dr. White, of course, in all probability, who had done the work on Julia and her family. The truth had popped out in Julia's first surprised response to my question. Dr. White was a famous man. I'd read more than one article about him in the *Washington Post*, still published on our side of the river. He had pioneered—was still pioneering—the brave new world of eternal life. I had read that the developmental costs were astoundingly expensive.

He was a big man, and he did have a beard.

I was not sure that he was nice.

The course was Nanobiology 6000. The auditorium contained about a hundred students. What Julia had told me was true; she was a medical student, but her schedule did not call for her attendance at this particular lecture.

Maybe she had heard it before.

The lecture was about the latest artificial livers and how they worked. I didn't understand much of it. I waited until the flurry of students around the



doctor died down and then stepped up to him and introduced myself.

“I’m trying to find out about some work you did some years ago. At a place called Swannanoa.”

His eyes were pale blue and cold. “I’ve heard of Swannanoa, of course. But I’m not connected with them at all. Never have been. Now, if you’ll excuse me—”

“I believe that Julia Quick is your student.”

He looked at me more intently. “I have a lot of students, as you can see.”

“Perhaps you’ve heard of her father, Frank Quick.”

“No. Is that all?”

“I think that will do.” I left him standing there, looking after me. Rather disturbed, I hoped.

It’s often the most effective thing to do.

I spent most of the ride back to town thinking about how irritated I was with Ms. Julia Quick.

I spent the rest of the ride thinking about how irritated I was with myself.

\* \* \* \*

I got to the library an hour before closing time, chagrined at my slowness. But the city was iced down and difficult to navigate. Freezing rain had blown into the crevices of the library’s door, and tiny crystals peppered my face as I pulled open the door.

The librarian, a middle-aged woman, looked up, startled, when I walked in the door. “I was just getting ready to leave. The storm has kept everyone home.”

“Do me a favor, please, and stay until closing time.”

“I suppose that I must.”

“I’m going to need some help. I need temporary receptors.”

“What? I didn’t think that there was anyone so backwards as to not have them!” She paused for a moment. “Sorry. That was rude.”

“They are free, aren’t they?”

“Yes. Provided by Beetech, Incorporated.”

“Because they are sure that they’ll sell me the real thing.”

She leveled a look at me. “They will.”

I looked around at the smooth, bookless surfaces of the library. “I hardly believed it, but it’s true. No books.”

“Oh, there are books! Millions more than we ever had when they were made of paper and cloth.”

“I’m actually looking for several things.”

“We’ll get you set up first.” She glanced at the clock. “That should take fifteen minutes.”

“And it will wear off ?”

“Your ability to comprehend information metapheromonically will, unfortunately, last only twelve hours.”

“Is it really that precise?”

Her voice was stern. “Of course. It is completely biological. Nothing is more precise than biochemistry.”

“Let’s go, then.”

She opened a package and pressed a strip of something sticky to the skin on the back of my hand. In the package was also a sugar-cube-sized black object, onto which she pressed the strip. It made no sound; it did not flash; it was simply a black cube.

After a moment the cube turned white.

“Eat it,” she said.

“Nothing happened,” I said, after it dissolved in my mouth, tasting not unlike a sugar cube.

“Give it a minute.” She went back to her desk and busied herself with some chores, during which time several small, pale green ovals formed on both of my palms.

I called to her. “I think it’s ready.” I looked at my hands with some trepidation. What had I done?

She hurried over. “Orientation.” She handed me a pair of gloves. “Please stay seated for the next few minutes.”

I could hardly have budged.

It was like an intense, sudden acceleration. Surprising, powerful music suffused my being in sharp shards so sweet they brought tears to my eyes. Sometimes it slowed to a flow of voices murmuring and I could even catch a word or two. Then it went into my brain and showed me all my memories and I was surprised at both their richness and their paucity, for I had lived only fifty years and this intelligence against which I was now measured was all of humanity’s collective, written memories.

After I could see my surroundings again, she returned, removed the gloves, and set a box of tissues next to me on a low table. I took one and wiped my face and blew my nose. The eyes of the pale, stern librarian were no longer pedestrian, but instead were infused with wisdom and the essence of agape.

“You see?” she asked, in a voice so rich and melodious that I had to wipe my eyes again. My senses were immensely augmented, so much so that it was almost too much to bear.

At least it was only temporary.

“Now why did you come?”

“I need to learn about the process of making artificial people. And I need to access a police database.”

She seemed disappointed. The requests were so mundane. But she leaned forward and tapped the table in front of me several times, glanced at the clock again. “Usually we just leave people to explore, but I can get

you into that information immediately. You understand that without permanent receptors the information you access may not lodge with you for long afterwards, and certainly will lack its initial sharpness. The whole package changes the chemistries of memory.”

“Do you get a commission?”

She smiled. The surface before me changed from hard to gel-like. She directed me to place my hands, now covered with small green ovals, onto this interface. “Perhaps you know, but—”

“I’ve studiously avoided knowing much about this at all.”

“All right. Inside this interface are bacteria. Their DNA is capable of carrying ... a lot of information. This information will be transferred to you in a form of chemical communication based on pheromones, artificially augmented so that they are now called metapheromones. These metapheromones will go directly to your brain and you will know what you want to know.”

“But I won’t remember?”

“I can impregnate your slate with the information.”

“I don’t have a slate.”

She sighed, went to her desk, and returned with a rolled-up sheet of something that felt stiff and somewhat like plastic. “Smooth this onto the desktop. That’s right. Anywhere. Okay, it has picked up your signature by touch. It contains about three thousand layers and each layer is a sheet of molecules that are light or dark and will configure themselves to show you a printed page.”

“And it will work even after this wears off ?”

“When it’s rolled up, just snap it against a hard surface and it will activate.”

“All free.”

“This is nothing,” she said. “Just a taste. You’ll want to pay for the rest. Now tell me what you need.”

I learned that most of the eye systems had backups. The artificial

persons who had them—and they were the most advanced—slept in cocoonlike slings that lifted information from them through many interfaces, so that the full, complex flavor of consciousness could be most fully transferred. This information was sent to the backup, wherever it was kept.

Whomever Julia Quick was after—and I was no longer sure who that might be—was in Frank Quick's home safe.

I found the Quick accident in the police report. Julie's mother and sister were indeed seriously injured. She and her father were not.

Probing of the hospital records revealed that the entire family had been taken away by ambulance and released into the care of their physician, Dr. White.

But getting this information was the least of what happened to me while I was there.

I walked out into the cold evening an hour later. Everything was sharp; tightly focused; powerful. I felt as if previously I had not been alive.

No wonder people like Julia White could treat people like me with such arrogance. She believed me to be a dolt, the perfect facilitator.

She had nearly been right.

When I returned to my office, she was pacing back and forth in front of the door. She whirled and confronted me. "Where have you been?"

"Out." I unlocked the door with deliberate slowness.

She followed me inside. "Well? Do you have the copies?"

"No. I wish that I could offer you a drink, but—"

She shouted, "All I need you for is a simple thing. A very simple thing! You are astoundingly incompetent. You're ... you're fired!"

Then she rushed out the door, crying.

I waited until she was safely into the elevator, then took the stairs.

She hurried down the wet, gray street, bright with evening lights and falling snow.

She did not look back once. As before, she did not pause when she reached Key Bridge. She wrapped her cloak more closely to herself as she walked, head down as if she were thinking hard, into the foggy grayness of what was once Georgetown.

I pulled my hat brim low. I looked around.

But this part of the Virginia side of the bridge, Rosslyn, was deserted. I took a deep breath, then followed Julie Quick across the bridge. The river roared beneath me. Ice, white in the glare of lights from the Virginia side, fringed gigantic rocks below. I was between two worlds, vulnerable.

And terrifically inclined to simply jump off the bridge and be borne away into the past forever. I forced myself to take one step after the other, holding tight to the railing, and not to keep from falling. I realized that this was why I had avoided the bridge, high places, owning a vehicle that I could drive into a tree.

\* \* \* \*

The change started in the hand with which I gripped the cold railing of the bridge. I could hear nothing but the surge of the river beneath, a sweet, fresh roar. I breathed in the damp fog, searched in vain for any sign of life ahead.

It was as if my hand were asleep, then sharp, unbearable prickles infused my entire body.

I think that there was a moment of complete darkness before I was changed over.

\* \* \* \*

I clung to the railing, dizzy. I took a few breaths of new air. I was afraid, and wondered if I would now die. It hadn't seemed to matter at all when I stepped onto the bridge.

Now I wanted, quite terribly, to live.

I walked forward, with a brisk, strong step. And then I ran.

\* \* \* \*

On the other side of the bridge, fog-enveloped streetlights gently silvered the night. M Street was lively with people. It was the dinner hour. Restaurants and shops were lit against winter darkness.

I hurried along, wondering how long the event on the bridge had taken, and wondering what had happened to me.

I did not see her.

And then—

I dashed across the street and into a doorway. It was her, in the stairway, walking up a narrow flight of stairs.

“Julia!”

She turned slightly, saw me, and continued her climb.

“Julia, wait!”

She began to run, tripping up the stairs on those silly high heels. She stumbled and I grabbed her hand and caught her. She turned her head and looked at me.

There was no recognition in her eyes.

But my hand held her bare hand.

A jolt of pain and anguish flowed through me, then a barrage of emotions. Guilt, I recognized. Regret, yes. But the astonishment and the anger were as distinguishable from my own emotional makeup as if I were looking at two different colors, or hearing a saxophone and a violin. I was assaulted by images—terrible, chaotic, unmistakable.

I saw murder.

“Who are you?” She jerked her hand back and stood, smoothing her skirt and picking up her hat, which had fallen.

I stared at her. “You don’t remember?” But it seemed quite certain. She did not. “I am Mike Jones. A private investigator. You hired me to recover your mother and your sister. You say that your father murdered them, perhaps.”

For a moment her eyes softened. She blinked a few times. Looked downward. Looked back at me. “Who did you say you are, again?”

Then a door slammed above us. I heard footsteps.

“Julia! Are you all right? I hoped you would return here. Someone came to the university—”

I recognized the voice.

It was Dr. White.

His footsteps continued down the stairs. He stopped when he saw me. “What are you doing here?” he demanded.

“Julia—”

“Julia is unwell. I am her doctor.”

“You said you didn’t know her.”

“This is an issue of patient confidentiality. I insist that you leave her, immediately. She needs treatment...” he glanced down at her hands. “Julia! Where are your gloves?”

“Oh.” Her hand flew to her mouth. “I took them off when I came in the door. I was ... somewhere ... I don’t remember ... surely I didn’t cross the river?” She looked at Dr. White beseechingly.

Dr. White advanced toward me with a certain resolve.

I rushed down the stairwell and out onto the street. Crossing it, I ducked into a bar and watched through the window from behind some blinds.

Dr. White stepped out onto the street, looked up and down. He stared for a long time in the direction of the bridge. Then he went back inside and the door shut behind him.

My old self would have returned immediately to Virginia. To the past.

But it was difficult to even think about doing so. Everything here was wonderful; perfect. I realized that people did not return to the other side simply because they did not want to.



A jazz pianist played quietly. I took a seat at the bar and fleetingly wished for a drink and some of the crab soup that I saw on the menu.

The bartender brought me a very fine Scotch and a bowl of crab soup. When I asked him how he knew what I wanted, he pointed to the place where my hand had rested on the bar. Bright print on its surface, upside down, showed my unvoiced desire. "But I can't pay."

He looked puzzled. "You already have."

I ate my soup, and drank, awash in a new, sharp, glowing feeling. A rebirth of mind. Of soul. I was young again, too, and here in Georgetown with my wife, Marlene, soon after we were married, when we were both so happy with each other and with life.

I hadn't seen her in many years.

Something about being here, in this place, something that happened on the bridge, had resolved that dark pain, that feeling of not being good enough. Marlene was finally swept from me. She had been swept from me by Scotch before, though, and I was suspicious that this might not last any longer than the effects of the Scotch.

But somehow, I knew that I was fundamentally changed by something I would probably never understand. I was changed by some deep newness in the world. A newness produced by humans. Which I had been given, free, at the library: a process that opened biochemical doorways and allowed my transformation on the bridge.

There seemed to be no reason to ever leave this side of the bridge.

Except that I recalled Julia's images with great clarity.

Her memories had cascaded into me in that brief contact.

I took out the slate that the librarian had given me and looked at it for a moment, wondering what to do with it.

The bartender was there, suddenly, and took it from my hand and unrolled it. He smoothed it onto the top of the bar. "That's how," he said.

"But—"

“You’ve only been in here less than an hour. Don’t worry. We’ll all help you. The way you use this—you just put your hand there and download whatever it is you want to keep. One way to do it—look. Put your hand there. Fine. Now just touch what you want to do. Here’s the menu.”

“I learned something—from another person, just now—through touching her hand.”

“Fine. That’s how we communicate. So just touch this download command. Do you know her name?”

“Julia.”

“Tell it Julia—that’s right, it is trained to your voice. That’s the filename. Now put your hand there and go.”

I looked at him once more, with trepidation.

He smiled. “The brain is quite amazing. Don’t worry. It works. Gotta go.” He hurried to another customer.

In the quiet chat of the bar, Julie’s memories poured into the slate. Visual memories. Memories which were in what was probably her internalized voice, the way it sounded to her.

It took a long time to sort them out. In the process, I realized that she was somewhat crazy, filled with mental and emotional barriers. Some of them were natural.

And some of them had been installed by Dr. White.

Julia had been a child when she first came into contact with Dr. White.

She had been “read” in Swannannoa, as she had told me. And it was there, in that temporal stratum, that Dr. White’s voice, kind and fatherly, had implanted her loyalty to him. Her eyes had fluttered open at that point, and she saw him attach a patch to her arm—a patch that no doubt infused her with a more precise form of chemical compliance. The librarian had told me that biochemistry was very precise.

Perhaps his methods of implanting Julia’s future slavery were clumsy; I don’t know. But they seemed to have worked. He had probably used them on Frank Quick, too, but I had no way of actually knowing that. I surmised that if he had, Frank’s adult personality had been able to shrug them off

eventually. Julia's more malleable brain had made her a perfect victim.

I saw Dr. White and Mr. Quick quarrel in the family living room when Mr. Quick decided to terminate his hefty subscription payments. Because such arrangements were illegal, Dr. White had no legal recourse.

So he used Julia.

I saw her, as if through her eyes, going into her bedroom and opening a small zippered kit. Dr. White had helped her create it. The components were neatly organized—the disassembly enzymes, which would erase certain aspects of her father's personality (her father, after all, had paid Dr. White handsomely to create this very template), a few tools, another vial, all held in with wide elastic bands. I saw her drop something into her father's martini as he sat in an easy chair in the den, next to a large stone fireplace in which a fire blazed on the wintry afternoon. I saw him pass out, slump in his chair, and stop breathing, as Julia glanced impatiently at her watch. Her mother and sister were out shopping and not due to return for some time.

In a curious sense, what happened to Frank was not murder to her, because she then dragged him to the cocoon in which her mother—indeed a copy, since she had died soon after their automobile accident, along with Julia's sister—spent each night. With much effort, she heaved him into it and watched the cocoon shrink and cling to him.

She then—unemotionally, efficiently—perhaps because she was a medical student—gouged out his eye with a small, delicate stainless-steel instrument and dropped it into a plastic bag, which she pocketed. She then pulled a tiny box from her other pocket, opened it, and removed an orb containing an artificial iris.

Which held an entire artificial personality.

She inserted the eyesphere into the eye socket of her father. As the cocoon absorbed his old personality, this would infuse the new one, which would presumably resume payments to Dr. White. If all went absolutely right.

She heard sounds in the hallway, but when she turned the doorway was empty. Her heart beating hard, she got her groggy and now artificial father out of the cocoon and led him to his bed, where he appeared to sleep. She then returned to the den, tossed the eye in its plastic bag into the fire, grabbed the martini glass, and rinsed it with bleach at the kitchen sink.

The next morning, as she was making coffee in the kitchen, she heard urgent whispering from the dining room between her mother and her sister. Caught the word “police.”

She realized, with a sickening feeling, that they either suspected or knew. That sound, at the bedroom door. They must have come home early from shopping.

She ran to her room, grabbed Dr. White’s vial of disassembly enzymes, and put them in her mother and sister’s coffee.

I knew that they were artificial, but it still gave me a turn as Julia quite calmly watched them drink the coffee and eat the pastries she took out to the sunny dining room. Perhaps they did so because they were both in shock, not completely believing that their Julia was capable of such acts.

As they were disassembled, Julia realized, with increasing panic, that they had of course spent the night in their cocoons. Their memories of the day—whatever they had seen, and their suspicions—had already flowed into the recording devices.

The dedicated interstices of their cocoons, the cables which sent the daily updates to eyelike biocomputers, ended at Frank Quick’s safe. I watched her ransack his office for the combination, but she could not find it.

Then, dazed, she walked across the bridge, into the city. And forgot, for a time—months, it looked like—what had happened.

Until Dr. White tracked her down.

She made it back to her neighborhood twice; made it to her front door, the second time, before fleeing. Not even Dr. White was persuasive enough to get her to face her father, artificial and malleable as he might now be. Something of morality, however faint or degraded, still remained.

Or perhaps it was simply pure fear.

Then she hired me.

I saw Dr. White many times in Julia’s memories. He had devised a way to maintain the wealth that would allow him to continue his “work.”

If you could call it that.

I was sure that the law would put several other names to it.

As I sat in the Georgetown bar, which seemed as close an approximation to heaven as I, with my limited imagination, could dream of, I reluctantly realized that I had to go back to the past.

I crossed back into Rosslyn the next morning, in the gray winter dawn, knowing what I had to do. I was not sure that the information would remain in my slate, or even if it was usable in a court of law, but I knew that hard evidence did exist.

The world was new, yes. But human decency still remained, in some of us, no matter how strange everything else had become.

\* \* \* \*

At first my old friend was not interested. "We have no jurisdiction over such proceedings, unfortunately," Detective John "Ace" Anderson, with whom I had a long-standing love-hate relationship, told me. "How many years have I known you, Mike? This is a first. You've never come to me with information. It's usually the other way around. I have to shake it out of you. We don't fool around with this artificial person stuff. There's not enough law to do one thing or another." He lighted a cigarette and leaned back in his battered chair. "You look like shit. What have you been up to?"

I put both hands on his desk, leaned over it, and played my card. "There's been a murder, Anderson. The murder of a real person. And you're not interested?"

"Why the hell didn't you tell me in the first place? What do you have?"

I told him.

The Quick house was in a wealthy Great Falls neighborhood, with a view of the Potomac through the snowy, leafless forest.

Mr. Quick himself answered the door, wearing expensive at-home clothing, impeccably groomed. He was balding, with dark hair, slightly overweight. He looked dazed; disoriented. But he was cordial enough. "Can I help you?"

Detective Anderson flashed his badge. "I'd like to ask you a few questions."

“About what?”

“A murder.”

“Whose?”

“Yours,” I told him.

\* \* \* \*

An artificial person cannot be charged with a crime. Laws are slow to catch up to reality.

But Julia and Dr. White, being real, were charged with the murder of Mr. Quick.

The police read the eye of the sister from the copy which they found in the safe. The testimony was indisputable. As the librarian had told me, biology is precise. It was all ascertained authentic by the best experts in the field. The sister had seen it all.

I watched Julia during the trial. She never looked at me, though she must have felt my gaze.

I wondered how she felt, trapped on this side of the bridge. Unable to slip into the city for her necessary amnesia. I knew a lot about self-induced amnesia, and I understood Julia Quick’s need for it.

I watched her exchanging glances with Dr. White more than once during the trial. She looked anguished; he looked stony. He too was trapped here, hopefully for life.

She had gone the limit for him—but not of her own volition. Her lawyer found an expert who was able to show quite conclusively that Dr. White had implanted within Julia an irresistible need to do his bidding no matter what. Something to do with pheromones, something that hadn’t worked nearly as well in Frank Quick. As a result of actions akin to child abuse and rape, Julia had committed this crime to give Dr. White what he so desired: money. Mr. Quick had a lot of it, and he was not planning on giving any more of it to Dr. White.

No one needed or had money on the other side of the bridge. It must have been deeply refreshing to Julia when she first went over and found

escape from the terrible memories of what she had been made to do. They say that we are on the brink of a great, but possibly confusing, new age, in which money will be obsolete.

But Dr. White was like me. He had never fully crossed the bridge. He preferred to stay here, in the place where he had prestige, trying to do good—which unfortunately began to call for a few questionable deeds. He testified that he was trying to help people live longer. For that, being in the old-fashioned world, he needed old-fashioned money.

Apparently he didn't care where it came from.

His and Julia's choice of a facilitator for their plan to get the evidence of their crime had backfired quite spectacularly. But only by something quite close to accident. They had me pegged correctly. They just hadn't counted on the fact that, once, I had been a good detective, and that a bit of the fire and curiosity was left.

Julia, being her father's daughter, was quite clever in matters of the law and was able to style herself as a preyed-upon sweet young thing. Which, in truth, she was. After the trial, when she refused any kind of rehabilitation, she was escorted to Key Bridge and told not to come back. That was her sentence.

The trial was highly publicized, and several other victims came forward. Though their evidence was not brought into this trial, it became clear that Dr. White had worked this particular scam upon more than one family.

Dr. White was put away for life.

Or, at least, someone who seemed exactly like him was.

Mr. Quick's artificial counterpart, who afterwards won a groundbreaking case for the legal recognition of such entities, paid me well for my time. I heard that he once again reconstituted his family, after having the copies thoroughly cleansed of any bugs installed by Dr. White. He still lives in Great Falls with his wife and his daughter Elizabeth.

He did not re-create Julia.

\* \* \* \*

I've paid for another year in the Zephyr Building. I get some business,

not much. Same as before. Maybe someday someone as interesting as Julia Quick will step into my office.

Maybe she will be a nice person.

I have been stopped by the police more than once, when I return from Washington to Rosslyn. They take note of my frequent visits, and fear that I will bring some kind of nanotech contagion back with me.

I'm not sure why I still return to this side of the river.

Except that, despite my permanent conversion, I'm the same person, really.

We have all been artificial for quite some time, I realized. Even I had been saved by antibiotics, a purely human extrapolation, more than once. But now, human intellect has created the means for us to pass our previous limits. The challenge is not, as I had seen it before, to stubbornly remain in the past. Instead, the challenge is to use our new knowledge and abilities with respect for all humans, without coercion. It is a new literacy, and, like literacy, it can lead many different places. For the first time in history, it is possible for us to have a vision of what we are really about. I've decided that it's my responsibility, and everyone's, to work on this vision, to think about what is good in humans, and worth keeping.

I told you that I'd changed.

I like my office. I like the light of morning here. I like dark snowy afternoons in winter. I like the present, this strange mix of the past and the future.

I like life.

I will hold onto it as long as I can.